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News | Opinions | Business | Sports | Arts & Life | Community | WheelsPress | JobsPress | Classified | Archive

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Halifax-based artist shares colourful Spanish influence

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By ELISSA BARNARD Arts Reporter

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Karen Kulyk's oil painting Tenir Festa (Javier Bardem takes the day off in Barcelona) is from her new exhibit, A Catalan View, of images from Ceret and Barcelona. The man who has taken a clean shirt off the line is, in Kulyk's imagination, Spanish actor Javier Bardem (No Country for Old Men, Vicky Cristina Barcelona). A Catalan View is at Gallery Page and Strange, 1869 Granville St., to Oct. 31.

Karen Kulyk feels the presence of Picasso when she is in the Catalan town of Ceret.

There Picasso and Georges Braque came up with cubism in 1911 and Kulyk can understand why. The broken-up geometry exists in the landscape and jumble of old houses.

"I can feel those who've come before me, I'm not trying to paint like them but they do inspire me," says the Halifax-based artist, who switched to painting in oil from watercolour and chalk pastel 10 years ago.

"When Picasso was painting in Ceret, Gaudi was making his architecture in Barcelona, Matisse was working on fauvism and Dali was doing important surrealist work. I wish I could go back in time!"

Kulyk has gone back to Ceret every year since a collector first invited her to stay in his empty house one July 10 years ago. This spring she went with a plan for her exhibit, A Catalan View, at Gallery Page and Strange to Oct. 31.

"I knew I wanted the show to start in a small town and move to a big city but I wanted to stay in the

core of both."

The exhibit starts with Ceret, a medieval Spanish-flavoured town in the French Pyrenees. "These mountains, the Pyrenees, are amazing. You always feel their presence and it helps you. It gives me a sense of scope, of my position in the world and it makes me paint these paintings."

On this trip she discovered "how important it is to look at what you're trying to paint from all angles and then you decide how to portray it."

She has played with cubism in patterns where it naturally suggests itself in the land and architecture

In Soutine, Ceret 1, a painting done from the same viewpoint Soutine took 100 years ago, she captures a controlled riot of crowded houses with awnings, windows and shutters, as well as sloping terra cotta roofs and a pitch of a hill down to a courtyard.

Kulyk set up her easel at the top of the hill doing drawing after drawing, several of which were caught up in Ceret's famous tremontane wind and tossed down the hill. Another painter at her side suggested eliminating the windows.

"I thought I can't do that. I love the way the windows work. They're almost like musical notes."

Barcelona is as ancient as Ceret but more Spanish and "more closed up," she said. "You don't see people doing their intimate domestic things which I saw in Ceret."

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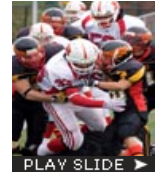
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She was thrilled, then, when she opened up the back window in her hotel room and saw a courtyard and the back of a house with balconies crowded with planters and lines of laundry and huge blue curtains used for shade and privacy. "I watched this view, morning, noon and night. It was amazing. That was my television, my theatre. I did drawings of those amazing balconies and how they changed."

Kulyk, who is off to her husband's birthplace of New Zealand for a month at the end of the week, hopes to return to Ceret in the spring.

"When I first came here I felt I was coming home, like I'd been here before. I'd really like to end up in that part of the world. It haunts me."

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[Back](#)

The
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NEWS

- Front Page
- Metro
- Nova Scotia
- Canada
- World
- Business
- Sports
- Arts & Life
- Travel
- Books
- Religion
- Science
- The Nova Scotian

COMMUNITY

- Community News
- NS Communities

OPINIONS

- Editorials
- Columnists
- News Columns
- Business Columns
- Sports Columns
- Arts & Life Columns
- Community Blogs
- Community Reviews
- Posting Up Blog
- MacKinnon Cartoon

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Obituaries
- Births
- Cards
- InMemoriams
- Milestones

MULTIMEDIA

- Photos
- Videos
- Community Photos

JOBSPRESS

- JobsPress
- News & Resources
- Advertising
- Post a Job

WHEELSPRESS

- WheelsPress
- Search
- Sell Your Vehicle
- Dealers
- Advertising

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- Today's Paper
- Classifieds
- Subscribe
- NiE
- Professional Directory
- South Shore Calendar

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- About Us
- Contact Us
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- Library Services
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Use

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- Sales Executives
- Media Kits

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- Print Upload
- Web Upload
- Media Kits

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- Lotteries
- Sudoku
- Crossword
- Comics
- Contests

CHARITIES

- Chronicle Herald Charities
- Bill Lynch Memorial Fund
- Rainbow Haven Opportunities Fund
- The Goodfellows' Club

USEFUL INFORMATION

- E-Flyers
- Eye on Nova Scotia
- N.S. Highway Cams
- Horoscope
- Lotteries
- Tides
- Weather
- Movie Times
- What's Happening
- Mayflower TV Guide
- Herald Archive